



MATERNITY TOURISM IN HAWAI'I

THESE TWO COMPANIES
HELP PREGNANT
CHINESE WOMEN
OBTAIN VISAS AND FLY TO
HAWAI'I SO THEIR CHILDREN
ARE BORN HERE AND GET
U.S. CITIZENSHIP

BY NICOLE TAM

GOEN GAO
RUNS A
TOURISM
COMPANY
FOR CHINESE
VISITORS
CALLED
HAWAII
LULUTRIP,
AND A SIDE
BUSINESS
CALLED HI
BABY USA
CENTER,
WHICH HELPS
PREGNANT
WOMEN
FROM CHINA
TO SAFELY
DELIVER
BABIES IN
HAWAII.

The side business is part of maternity tourism,

A GROWING BUSINESS SECTOR in Hawai'i, California and other parts of the U.S. in which pregnant Chinese women travel to the U.S. to give birth so their children become American citizens and can get American passports.

But the service is not cheap: A baseline package for three months is \$33,000, according to the HI Baby USA Center website, which is almost entirely in Mandarin Chinese. The deluxe package, with better accommodations, is \$47,000.

This reporter spoke with Gao on the phone in Mandarin; during the call, I identified myself as a reporter. After that, he did not respond to repeated phone calls and texts.

On the state's online registry of businesses, the address listed for Hawaii Lututrip is 1340 Kaihe'e St. in Makiki. I visited the home twice; during the first visit, I met with Gao. On my second visit, nobody answered the door though four minivans were parked in front of the house. On the phone and in person, Gao re-

peatedly said he currently had no clients.

The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees citizenship to any child born in the country. The children who are born here to foreign parents are sometimes called "anchor babies."

Most Chinese parents go back to China one month after the child is born, when the child's passport is ready, but the passport and citizenship open the door to future opportunities in America.

Gao's is not the only maternity tourism company operating in Hawai'i. Emma, who refused to give her last name when she was interviewed in person in Mandarin, is the Honolulu representative for another maternity company called HISummer International, based in China. She helps expectant mothers in China to set up visas so they can come to Hawai'i.

Because Gao had refused to talk to me after I told him I am a reporter, a little subterfuge seemed necessary to learn more from this other company: I told Emma that my cousin in Hong Kong is interested in coming to Hawai'i to give



THIS HOUSE IN MAKIKI IS LISTED AS THE ADDRESS FOR HAWAII LULUTRIP, THE SISTER COMPANY FOR HI BABY USA CENTER, A MATERNITY TOURISM COMPANY.

MATERNITY TOURISM IN HAWAII

See Their Websites

You can't use Google to find the websites for HI Baby USA Center or HISummer International, the two companies that support Chinese women who want to give birth in Hawai'i. Their websites are almost entirely in Mandarin Chinese and aimed at Chinese people – not Americans.

The companies may change their web addresses, but at presstime, these shortcut links take you to their websites:

- tinyurl.com/HIBabyUSACenter
- bit.ly/2BIaDTh

the two months before birth and \$15,000 after birth. For that you get a one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment plus three meals a day before birth and five meals after.

That totals \$33,000 for a standard three-month stay. A nanny after birth is extra and the price does not include hospital fees for the actual birth and any medical care afterward for mother or child.

HISummer International offers a different package that does not include meals. A fee of \$21,000 per month gives you a two-bedroom apartment in Waikiki; that also includes pickup and drop-off at Daniel K. Inouye International Airport, preparing women for clinic appointments, plus a tour of Honolulu's Chinatown and a Costco visit once a week.

The rent for a furnished two-bedroom apartment in Waikiki can run from \$1,800 to \$3,000 monthly. That leaves a huge profit margin for HISummer International.

"Other cities are definitely cheaper. But this is Waikiki and you can't compare with other cities," Emma says.

Emma says she also serves

PHOTO: NICOLE TAM; ILLUSTRATIONS: KELSEY IBE
birth; that's why she agreed to meet with me in person. (Though I have cousins in Hong Kong, none are interested in actually giving birth in Hawai'i.)

"The things we do (maternity tourism), is similar to a tourism company," Emma says. At peak times, she says, she has had up to eight clients in Honolulu at once.

After our conversation was well underway, I repeatedly told Emma that I was a student reporter (this reporting was originally for a UH class project). When I also told her that I worked part-time at a local TV station, she immediately ended the conversation and hurried away.

Leona, the president of HISummer International, who also declined to disclose her last name, was interviewed briefly by text using the Chinese app WeChat. Her business has six offices in China and sends its pregnant clients to Los Angeles, Canada and Hawai'i.

Emma and Leona started the Hawai'i branch of the business after meeting in Hawai'i in 2014, Emma says. HISummer International is not listed in the state's on-

line registry of businesses.

John Robert Egan is an immigration lawyer based in Honolulu who says lawmakers should change the law to eliminate maternity tourism.

"Nobody outside of the U.S. should be making money by bringing (immigrants) into the U.S. ... I find it to be offensive that people in other countries are profiteering (from) what is essentially the sale of a U.S. citizenship," Egan says.

MATERNITY TOURISM IS COSTLY

EVEN THE CHEAPEST SERVICES offered by HI Baby USA Center are costly. According to its website, which is almost entirely in Mandarin, the minimum cost is \$9,000 for each of

Maternity Tourism Elsewhere

Hong Kong had 88,000 births in 2010; almost half, 40,000, were to mainland Chinese mothers, according to the Hong Kong Hospital Authority and Department of Health. One reason so many Mainland Chinese mothers gave birth in Hong Kong was to escape penalties tied to having more than one child in China, before the 40-year one-child policy was lifted in 2016.



as the middleman for clients by finding vacation rental homes based on each customer's wants and needs, but the client must arrange their own meals and other services.

"I don't want to be responsible for the customer's experience, say if I hire someone and they don't like it," Emma says. "They can just choose themselves who to hire."

She says having clients do most things themselves is simpler, means less work for her and saves the client money.

LEGAL ISSUES

THERE IS NO LAW preventing foreigners from giving birth in the U.S. and therefore ensuring their child has American citizenship. However, anyone who lies about the purpose of their visit to the U.S. can be charged with visa fraud, according to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement website.

The Los Angeles Times and other news organizations have reported that Southern California is a hotbed of maternity tourism and that many "birthing hotels" have been raided by ICE agents. According to one L.A. Times report, those arrested are usually operators, not the mothers, and sometimes the charges include illegally operating a business in a residential neighborhood.

Emma rents Airbnb units in the Waikiki and Ala Moana neighborhoods for her clients. Even though Hawaii rents are expensive, she says many of her clients can afford the extra cost for a comfortable, spacious apartment

and aren't inclined to share a room to save money. "I don't want to do that because they all usually rich people, and that's too much work."

COMING TO AMERICA

THE FIRST STEP for someone in China to have a baby here: Get a visa. That's one service performed by the six HISummer International offices in China. Their goal is to help clients get visas and set up their "vacations." And on the surface, booking a maternity "vacation" is just like booking a regular one.

Emma says most mothers come to the United States about 1½ months before their due dates and leave one month after birth. The timing is to ensure the child is already in America if born early and makes certain that the mothers do not stay too long, as costs add up even for the wealthy.

Generally, a citizen of a foreign country who wishes

Chinese Law

Chinese authorities generally consider a child to be "born in China" if one parent is a Chinese citizen, even if the child was born outside of China. The "born in China" policy applies even if the child is born in America and issued a U.S. passport soon after birth.

Source: U.S. State Department

to enter the U.S. must first obtain a visa: a nonimmigrant visa for temporary stay or an immigrant visa for permanent residence. Citizens of 38 qualified countries can visit the U.S. without a visa under the Visa Waiver Program.

Taiwan is part of the Visa Waiver Program but China is not.

Rep. Steve King of Iowa hopes to shut down maternity tourism. Last year, the congressman introduced H.R. 140, the Birthright Citizenship Act. The purpose is to "clarify those classes of individuals born in the United States who are nationals and citizens of the United States at birth."

One proposed change: For anyone born in the U.S. to receive citizenship, one parent must be a citizen or national of the U.S., an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the U.S. or an alien performing active service in the armed forces.

Repeated calls to the congressman and other supporters of the bill on multiple occasions were not returned.



ABOUT THE REPORTER: Nicole Tam is a journalism student at UH Mānoa and a former *Hawaii Business* intern. A much shorter version of this report was published on the HoaiOahu student journalism website as part of a class project. Tam is fluent in spoken and written Mandarin.

Hospital Costs in Hawai'i

The costs for a hospital birth vary depending on the health of mother and child, and the length of their stay. For an uncomplicated birth, the process usually lasts two days for a vaginal delivery and three days for a C-section. Patients at both Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women and Children and The Queen's Medical Center

are billed for services after being discharged from the hospital.

Kapi'olani posts its prices online for customers who do not have health insurance: vaginal delivery is \$14,891 with hospital stay; a C-section is \$24,061 with hospital stay.

The Queen's information telephone line provided these prices: vaginal delivery

for \$11,900 with hospital stay; C-section for \$18,000 with hospital stay. Neither of the local maternity tourism companies cover any of the birth or medical costs.

Kapi'olani averages 6,100 births a year, according to Kristen Bonilla, marketing manager in the communications department of Hawai'i Pacific Health, Kapi'olani's parent

company. Queen's averages between 1,500 and 1,700 births a year, but neither hospital keeps track of a patient's nationality.

Many of the women coming to the Islands to give birth can't speak English proficiently; federal civil rights laws require hospitals to offer free translation services for mothers who need them. **HB**